

Jamestown

The Roanoke Island settlement was a failure, but the British did not give up hope of colonization of the New World. In May 1607, a group of 105 English men and boys landed in Virginia. They chose to build a fort near a river that flowed in the Chesapeake Bay. They named the river the James River and the fort Jamestown in honor of the king of England, James I. The colonists thought it was a good site because they had access to water in the river and the site was easy to defend.

However, they were not experienced outdoorsmen and did not realize that the fort was built on a swamp which contained mosquitoes carrying the deadly malaria virus. The water was salty from the Atlantic Ocean, and the soil was sandy and poor for growing crops.

The colonists themselves were not prepared for the hard task of building a town. Many men were nobles in England and came to America to find riches, not to farm land. Others were soldiers and convicts from England who quarreled among themselves instead of working together to find food and secure the fort. The mosquitoes made life difficult for the colonists as well. During the winter of 1607, 66 of the original 104 settlers died of either malaria or starvation.

Captain John Smith knew someone had to take charge of the group. He ordered, "He that will not work, shall not eat." If he heard a man swear, he poured cold water down the man's sleeve. Captain Smith brought order to the settlement and saved the colony.

As well as organizing the colonists, Captain Smith bartered with the Algonquin Indians for corn and beans. He led the colonists through their first year in Jamestown, but he was forced to return to England in 1609 to receive treatment for a gunpowder accident.

With their strong leader gone, the small Jamestown colony suffered through the worst winter in their history. Fire, drought, disease, Indian attacks, and little food almost destroyed the colony. Known as the "starving time," settlers scavenged the land for acorns, tree bark and even rats to eat. Relief came in June 1610, when the new governor, Lord De La Warr, arrived in three ships loaded with supplies.

Jamestown would have failed completely as a British colony had it not been for John Rolfe's introduction of tobacco as a cash crop. The high demand for tobacco in England and the sandy soil of Virginia made tobacco growing a profitable business for the Jamestown colonists.